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*Governor*



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*Lt. Governor*

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## **Baker-Polito Administration Announces Emergency Actions to Address COVID-19**

*Governor announces emergency on three week school closures, prohibiting gatherings of 25 or more*

**BOSTON** – Today, the Baker-Polito Administration announced a three-week suspension of school operations for educational purposes at all public and private elementary and secondary (K-12) schools in the Commonwealth beginning Tuesday, March 17, and a series of new guidance and legislation in response to COVID-19.

“Our administration is taking these rapid steps to protect the health and safety of our residents to mitigate the spread of COVID-19,” **said Governor Charlie Baker**. “We know that a lot of the measures we are putting into place, including mandatory school closures and prohibiting gatherings of 25 people or more, will cause disruption in people’s day to day lives. With the steps we are taking today, we can ensure residents can still access key state services while taking necessary precautions to limit the spread of COVID-19.”

“The legislation our administration is filing will help ease burdens on cities and towns regarding municipal governance as they work to keep their residents safe,” **said Lt. Governor Karyn Polito**. “We look forward to working with the Legislature to swiftly enact these bills to help provide our cities and towns with relief.”

The bills and guidance that Governor Baker outlined today include the following:

### **Schools in the Commonwealth**

***Elementary and Secondary Schools: suspend educational operations from March 17 until April 6. [Full order available here.](#)***

Given the evolving data regarding cases of COVID-19 and out of an abundance of caution for the health and safety of children and school staff, the Governor is ordering a 3-week suspension of school operations for educational purposes at all public and private elementary and secondary (K-12) schools in the Commonwealth (not including residential and day schools for special needs students), beginning Tuesday, March 17 and continuing until Monday, April 6. The suspension of educational programming would not necessarily affect the availability of school buildings for the provision of food or other essential non-educational services. As April 6 approaches, the administration will provide additional guidance.

During this period it is critical that students and their families, as well as school staff, stay home as much as possible. If an individual needs to leave home, it is essential to strictly follow social distancing guidelines by avoiding crowds, canceling social gatherings, and maintaining a safe separation of at least 6 feet from others. Restricting access to school buildings will have little impact on public health if these best practices are not followed in good faith.

Although schools must suspend in-person educational operations, staff should be planning for how best to equitably provide alternative access to student learning opportunities during this period and potentially beyond. Equally important, school personnel should develop plans for ensuring to the greatest extent possible that families have access to essential non-academic services for their children – especially involving special education and food services for students who are most vulnerable.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) will work in partnership with schools and districts to develop strategies and resources to sustain learning and vital services throughout this closure period. Already, DESE has received a partial waiver from the U.S. Department of Agriculture providing greater flexibility regarding food service in certain districts with higher concentrations of low-income students and is actively pursuing additional waivers for the remaining schools and districts.

***Early Education and Care: follow EEC/DPH guidance regarding closure based on actual cases***

The suspension of educational operations at K-12 schools will inevitably affect the provision of pre-school and childcare services. Although we are not ordering the closure of childcare programs at this time, we are strongly urging childcare providers to strictly observe guidelines that are being issued by the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and the Department of Public Health (DPH), which call for temporary closures based on actual direct or indirect exposures to individuals with COVID-19.

At the same time, EEC will prioritize the maintenance and expansion of childcare capacity serving front-line healthcare workers and first-responders across the state.

***Higher Education: continue to move towards remote learning***

With regard to higher education, the Department of Higher Education and DPH strongly recommend that colleges and universities, both public and private, continue to pursue strategies to reduce the need for students to be on campus, including suspending in-

person classes and implementing institution-wide programs to shift to remote learning, technology enabled solutions, and other tools to allow students to successfully complete course and degree requirements. Institutions should also pursue strategies to reduce the need for faculty and staff to be on campus by maximizing remote work opportunities, while maintaining essential on-campus services, especially for residential students who cannot safely return home. Additional guidance will be forthcoming.

**Gatherings & Restaurants:** Governor Baker issued an emergency order limiting gatherings to 25 individuals and prohibiting on-premises consumption of food or drink at bars and restaurants, beginning on March 17 and effective until April 6. [The full order is available here.](#)

**Executive Branch Employees:** All non-emergency state employees working in Executive Branch agencies should not report to their workplace on Monday, March 16th and Tuesday, March 17th. Employees who are designated by their managers as emergency for the purposes of coronavirus planning should report to work as well. Those employees will be contacted by their managers this evening. During this period, the administration will work to expand alternative work arrangements for the executive branch workforce and further develop plans to continue to provide essential state government services.

**Health Care:** The Department of Public Health issued guidance today that includes the following:

- All commercial insurers, self-insured plans, and the Group Insurance Commission are required to cover medically necessary telehealth services related to COVID-19 testing and treatment. [The full order is available here.](#)
- Insurers must do this without requiring cost-sharing of any kind – such as co-pays and coinsurance – for testing and treatment.
- Additionally, insurers cannot require prior authorization for these services.
- All assisted living residences are to ban visitors to protect the health of residents and staff. This is in addition to the federal guidance issued on Friday that bans visitors to nursing homes and rest homes.
- All hospitals operated by the Department of Public Health or the Department of Mental Health are to screen all visitors and restrict visitation if individuals show any indication of illness.
- Hospitals must cancel non-essential elective procedures.
- Authorizes licensed pharmacies to create and sell hand sanitizer over the counter.

**Registry of Motor Vehicles:** The Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) will extend the renewal timeline of certain credentials to reduce the need for customers to physically visit an RMV service center for in-person transactions. [The full order is available here.](#)

- Effective this week, the RMV will implement a 60-day extension to the current expiration date for Class D, Class DMs, ID cards, and Learner's Permits within the RMV system. All customers with expired/expiring credentials physically dated between March 1, 2020 and April 30, 2020, will continue to have an active status within the RMV system until sixty (60) days after the expiration date printed on their credential.
- This extension does not apply to vehicle registrations. Most vehicle registrations can be renewed online at Mass.Gov/RMV.
- This deadline extension will not apply to customers with Commercial Driver's Licenses (CDLs) or those whose end of stay in the United States is the same as the expiration date on their driver's license, ID card, or Learner's Permit.
- Customers eligible for this extension should wait to visit an RMV Service Center or AAA office (if a member of AAA), to renew until after the State of Emergency has been terminated.

**Unemployment Assistance:** The Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD) and the Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA), in coordination with the US Department of Labor (USDOL), are taking a series of actions to assist workers and employers.

For current unemployment claims:

- All requirements regarding attending seminars at the MassHire career centers have been suspended.
- Missing deadlines due to effects of COVID-19 will be excused under DUA's good cause provision.
- All appeal hearings will be held by telephone only.

The Department of Labor issued guidance to the states instructing state agencies to apply existing law flexibly. Under the DOL guidance, DUA may now pay unemployment benefits if a worker is quarantined due to an order by a civil authority or medical professional or leaves employment due to reasonable risk of exposure or infection or to care for a family member and does not intend to or is not allowed to return to work. The worker need not provide medical documentation and need only be available for work when and as able.

To assist individuals who cannot work due to the impact of COVID-19, the administration is filing emergency legislation that will allow new claims to be paid more quickly by waiving the one week waiting period for unemployment benefits.

EOLWD and DUA are also filing emergency regulations that will allow people impacted by COVID-19 to collect unemployment if their workplace is shut down and expects to reopen in four or fewer weeks. The following conditions apply:

- Workers must remain in contact with their employer during the shutdown.

- Workers must be available for any work their employer may have for them that they are able to do.
- An employer may request to extend the period of the covered shut-down to eight weeks, and workers will remain eligible for the longer period under the same conditions described above.
- If necessary, DUA may extend these time periods for workers and employers.

Employers who are impacted by COVID-19 may request up to a 60-day grace period to file quarterly reports and pay contributions.

The pending federal legislation proposes further relief including additional money for unemployment benefits, and relief to employers for charges related to unemployment benefits paid due to COVID-19.

**Municipal Governance Legislation:** Governor Baker announced a package of legislation to help address challenges to municipal governance resulting from the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, including potential delays in holding Town Meetings and adopting Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21) municipal budgets. Provisions in the proposed legislation include:

- Amend existing statute authorizing Moderators to postpone Town Meetings by thirty days. State statute currently permits postponement for “public safety emergency,” and the legislation would add “public health emergency” as a second reason for postponement.
- Permit local Select Boards to postpone Town Meetings beyond the statutory June 30 deadline when the Governor has declared a state of emergency and conditions prevent the completion of a Town Meeting.
- Permit local Select Boards to temporarily adopt lower quorum rules. This would be an opt-in provision to allow a town-by-town determination, and it would enable Select Boards to designate the quorum level. Numerous towns have existing low quorum provisions in their by-laws.
- Permit continued month-to-month spending into FY21 by towns based on the prior fiscal year budget with approval of the Division of Local Services during states of emergency. The month-to-month authorization would continue so long as a state of emergency prevents the adoption of a budget. Cities have similar authority under existing state law.
- Permit towns to access their free cash balance for FY21 spending with approval of the Division of Local Services. This would be based on the July 2019 certified balance and could continue until an FY21 budget is adopted.
- Permit municipal spending from revolving funds at the level set by their Fiscal Year 2020 appropriation until an FY21 budget is adopted.

- Authorize a three-year amortization period for deficit spending incurred as a result of COVID-19 crisis. The default rule would require an FY21 tax rate to provide for one-year amortization and this change would follow the 2015 precedent for snow removal costs.

**Boston Marathon:** Governor Baker also filed legislation designating September 14, 2020 as a legal holiday to support the rescheduled 2020 Boston Marathon. Earlier this week, Governor Baker joined Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh and marathon officials to announce that the Boston Marathon was being rescheduled from April 20, 2020 to September.

The Administration will continue to update the public on further developments and individuals are encouraged to consult both the [Department of Public Health](#) and the US [Centers for Disease Control](#) and Prevention websites for the most up to date information.

The latest information and guidance regarding COVID-19 is always available at [mass.gov/COVID19](https://mass.gov/COVID19).

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